



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as The Alexandria Times and Advertiser

Out of the Attic

The Ramsey Homes: The two stories

Alexandria Times, May 21, 2020

Image: The Ramsey Homes, Photo by Anna Mas.

Looking back on the Ramsey Homes, the former public housing buildings that were demolished in 2018, two stories stand out most prominently. One is the story of the buildings themselves, with their unique construction and how they were part of an early wave of prefabricated construction.

The second story is that of the people who lived there during the more than 70 years that they stood there. Construction is ongoing to replace the buildings on the corner of Wythe and Patrick streets.

The first story is easier to tell. The homes were built in 1941-42, to serve as housing for African American defense workers. Similar projects were built in Chinguapin Village and Cameron Valley. The buildings were designed by Delos Smith of Smith, Werner, and Billings Architects, who was known for favoring traditional styles.

Despite that preference, Smith's designs produced a minimalist modern design, which contrasted with the traditional styles seen in nearby Old Town. The look wasn't the only thing that was new to the confines of Alexandria. The buildings were constructed with a material known as "Fabcrete," which did not require an internal framework and that allowed for desired finishes to be attached, including composition board and laths.

The second story is harder. The original residents of the homes were defense workers, but their identities were kept secret. In 1947, the Alexandria City Directory listed the names and occupations of the residents. They included Carneal Coffee and Cleveland B. Tivey, who were listed as defense workers. Other residents included barbers, auto mechanics and janitors, evidence that the homes were no longer exclusively offered to those in the defense industry.

Although the Federal Public Housing Authority wanted to sell the property as early as 1946, it wasn't until 1953 that the Alexandria Redevelopment and Housing Authority acquired the homes. In 2008, the Ramsey Homes were included in the designation of the Uptown/ Parker Gray Historic District as a Virginia Historic District. In 2010, they were included in Parker-Gray's designation as a National Historic Landmark.

However, in 2015, city leaders requested permission to demolish the buildings, citing the need to increase the number of low-income and market-value housing units in Alexandria. In 2018, the homes were demolished, although part of one of the units was preserved as a reminder of its unique construction. More residents' stories will be presented to the general public when the city can conduct the Ramsey Homes Symposium, which was scheduled for May 15, but was canceled due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Although they weren't as old as the houses in Old Town, or even the ones surrounding the property in Parker-Gray, the Ramsey Homes served as reminders of new construction techniques and





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new housing policies in the period immediately following the World War II. Their replacement in this century reflects a change in thinking about both of our stories.

See alexandriava.gov/108729 for more information on the Ramsey Homes and new plans for the Symposium.

May is Preservation Month, a time when communities across the country celebrate historic preservation locally. The City of Alexandria has been a leader in the field of historic preservation, from the creation of the country's third oldest historic district in 1946 to the start of Alexandria Archaeology in 1961.

"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria.